

# Birds of Empire, Birds of Nation

A History of Science, Economy, and Conservation  
in United States-Colombia Relations



Camilo Quintero Toro





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*To Cata, who brings magic  
to my life every day.*



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# Introduction

## Birds and a Place for Nature in United States-Colombia Relations

As soon as one enters the newly remodeled Instituto de Ciencias Naturales (ICN)—Natural Sciences Institute—at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, one finds an enormous interactive panel with a big title in white letters that reads in both English and Spanish: “*Colombia País Megadiverso / Colombia, a Megadiverse Country.*” Moving a little closer one can see that the panel is divided into sections—plants, birds, butterflies, freshwater fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals—that show a little bit of Colombia’s natural world through pictures. A yellow and blue macaw stands close to a wax palm and a salamander. The purpose of the panel is to inform the visitor about the great number of plant and animal species that Colombia has. For example, 1,850 bird species have been recorded in the country, which makes it the nation with the most diverse avifauna in the world. Colombia is also the country with the most number of amphibian and butterfly species, 700 and 3,019, respectively. We also learn that Colombia is second place in the world in the number of vascular plant species (35,000) as well as freshwater fish (1,500).

Interestingly enough, the panel also teaches us about the other countries that are close to Colombia in number of plant and animal species. For example, Perú ranks second in the number of birds with 1,703 species, and ranks fourth in the count of freshwater fish with 855. Brazil stands second in the world in number of amphibian species, with 517, and has more vascular plant species and freshwater fish than Colombia with 55,000 and 3,000, respectively.

For a historian of science the entrance to the ICN presents far more questions than answers. It invites us to think about the way we perceive the concept of nation and its relation to nature. In terms of birds, for example, the countries that rank number one through four—Colombia, Perú, Brazil and Ecuador—in this apparent race to have the most number of bird species, are all neighboring countries separated only by human-constructed political frontiers. If birds apparently have no national frontiers, why do we place this category upon them?

Furthermore, why is there a fascination with the diversity of bird species? It is by showing the number of bird species that the exhibit is intended to make every Colombian feel patriotic about the natural world that inhabits his or her country. How did naturalists come to collect these thousands of specimens and learn to differentiate an important part of Colombia's fauna and flora? What is the story of these collections? How were they formed and by whom? What was the dynamic between the different people who participated in bird collecting, including amateurs, locals, and scientists of different nationalities?

This book seeks to answer these and other questions by focusing on the study and perception of Colombian birds from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth century, as a pretext to analyze social, scientific and environmental relations between the United States and Colombia. When I first started thinking about this project, my main interest rested in the study of North American scientific expeditions to Latin America, especially to Colombia. North American ornithologists in the first decades of the twentieth century developed a fascination with Colombia's avifauna because of its vast diversity. Several scientific expeditions were sent to Colombia to hunt and collect thousands of bird specimens that were later sent and housed in U.S. museums of natural history for scientific study. These expeditions were the perfect case to understand the scientific side that accompanied North America's political, economic and cultural expansion into Latin America at the turn of the twentieth century.

The histories of the bird collections housed today in museums of natural history were the perfect place to begin this query. Institutions like the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, the Natural Sciences Institute in Bogotá, or the Museum of Natural History in Popayán—institutions with an important place in both North American and Colombian science—hold collections with thousands of Colombian bird skins that represent the entirety of bird species found today in Colombian territory. Understanding how ornithologists and collectors formed these collections revealed a rich story of international scientific relations and power structures throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, I soon discovered that birds, more so than the naturalists who studied them, had a wonderful and ample story to tell. Colombian birds gained international recognition when they became entangled in the large global trade of the late nineteenth century to supply the millinery (hat) industry of New York, Paris and London, when European and North American women started wearing feathers as adornments on their heads. Colombia's avifauna was also part of a different kind of trade during the 1930s and 1940s, when Colombian and North American naturalists sought to understand and identify the main

characteristics of Colombia's—and South America's—avifauna by exchanging bird skins, information and gifts as part of their scientific practice. Likewise, Colombian birds were also part of the efforts to promote conservation policies in Latin America between the 1940s and 1960s. North Americans at the time realized that while migratory birds were protected in the United States, they had no protection once they traveled on their southward journeys to South America escaping the cold winters of the north. The creation of the first national parks in Colombia had much to do with the preservation of birds.

Reconstructing the story of Colombian birds, then, allows me to build a history that not only analyzes the early and complex scientific relations between the United States and Colombia, but also takes into account the importance of North America's growing influence over Latin America as well as Colombia's changing economic, cultural, and social history to understand different perceptions of the natural world in both countries. Colombians and North Americans constructed nature in radically different ways, which in turn responded to the very different historical milieus in which each of them was rooted. In 1915 a Colombian snowy egret and its natural world was very different for a North American naturalist who lived in a world where the United States' economic, political, and cultural influence in Latin America was growing, than it was for a Colombian naturalist who lived in a country that constantly looked beyond its borders in order to modernize itself. For a North American, the study of birds could bring a view of the natural world where U.S. imperialist intentions over Latin America were entirely legitimized. For a Colombian naturalist, the study of birds offered another way to promote relations with the United States and to incorporate Colombia in the international arena of science. Furthermore, the same snowy egret had a very different set of meanings for a naturalist placed in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, than for an inhabitant of Arauca, the poor and isolated region in Colombia where most egrets were hunted to supply the demand of wealthy women that rushed to New York City hat shops looking for exotic birds to decorate their heads.

At the same time, a toucan in 1940 had a different meaning to a North American who, in the midst of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, approached Latin America as an important economic and political ally, than to a Colombian rooted in a context in which nationalism had become a very strong current. For North Americans, birds and nature became tools to promote pan-American cooperation and integrate Latin America as a coherent region that worked closely with North American interests. For several Colombians, the study of birds was an important step to value nature as a national treasure. Discovering that Colombia was the country with the greatest diversity of birds was, for some naturalists, as emblematic for national identity as the national anthem.

In other words, a study of the changing meaning of Colombian birds allows us to understand the many ways in which imperialism, nationalism, and international economic relations, among others, influenced the construction of nature, science and the environment in United States-Colombia relations in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth.

This approach where birds are the main force guiding the narrative of the book allowed me to find what I believe is its main contribution: the place of nature and science in thinking new connections between imperialism and nationalism in history. The transnational aspect inherent in the history of Colombian birds allows me to frame this book within the history of science and imperialism. In the past three decades, scholarship in the history of science and imperialism has recognized the power of science in exercising control over the colonies and expanding empire. The periphery, once thought of as the mere recipient of western scientific knowledge, has become a dynamic place of appropriation, assimilation and influence upon scientific work in the metropolis.<sup>1</sup> Obtaining hegemony in another culture is a far more complex and ambiguous process than historians of science initially thought when they first turned their attention to the study of empires over thirty years ago.<sup>2</sup> In recent years several articles and books begun to enrich our understanding of the role that science and medicine played in the consolidation of U.S. international power in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. Scholars of U.S. scientific imperialism have convincingly made the argument that science and medicine were important allies in U.S. expansion in the twentieth century. In this way, research within the history of science and imperialism, which until recently largely focused on the interactions between European countries and their colonies in Latin America, Africa or Asia, has also found in the United

1. The literature on science and imperialism is vast. Some of the most representative collections can be found in: Antonio Lafuente, Alberto Elena, and M. L. Ortega, eds., *Mundialización de la ciencia y cultura nacional: Actas del Congreso Internacional "Ciencia, Descubrimiento y Mundo Colonial"* (Madrid: Doce Calles, 1993); Roy M. MacLeod, ed., *Nature and Empire: Science and the Colonial Enterprise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Patrick Petitjean, Catherine Jami, and Anne Marie Moulin, eds., *Science and Empires: Historical Studies about Scientific Development and European Expansion* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992).

2. See for example: David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State, Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Richard Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); William Kelleher Storey, *Science and Power in Colonial Mauritius* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1997).

States an important case that deserves attention.<sup>3</sup> Although it is not my intention to argue that North America's global expansion in the twentieth century had similar characteristics to Europe's formal imperialism between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries (although we should not forget that Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines became formal North American colonies), it is useful to think of the United States as an informal empire, especially when analyzing scientific and environmental relations.

The idea of looking at the United States as an empire is certainly not new in academia. Between the 1960s and the 1980s several scholars, including the Wisconsin School headed by William Appleman Williams, as well as the so-called dependency theorists in Latin America, constantly explained the relationship between the United States and Latin America as imperial. These studies argued that since the Latin American region had a strong economic dependence on the United States, North Americans had an enormous power to define and control the political and social course of the region. After all, during the first half of the twentieth century North America became Latin America's main economic partner, buying raw materials from its southern neighbors, selling to them North American manufactured products, and loaning them money in ever increasing foreign debts.<sup>4</sup>

Although the perspective of these scholars was very helpful to counterbalance the modernization theories of the 1950s, it was focused on an economic aspect, leaving aside other historical variables such as culture and society. Furthermore, these scholars analyzed the history of North American international relations from a dichotomist perspective. They understood the relations between the United States and the world as a relationship between oppressors and oppressed, without taking into account other levels of complexity with intermediate actors that could not be clearly placed in one side or the other.

3. Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine and Race Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Marcos Cueto, ed., *Missionaries of Science: The Rockefeller Foundation and Latin America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Stuart George McCook, *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Armando Solorzano Ramos, *¿Fiebre dorada o fiebre amarilla?: La Fundación Rockefeller en México (1911-1924)* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1997); Paul S. Sutter, "Nature's Agents or Agents of Empire? Entomological Workers and Environmental Change during the Construction of the Panama Canal," *Isis* 98, no. 4 (2007).

4. William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dell Pub. Co., 1972); Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependencia y desarrollo en América Latina; ensayo de interpretación sociológica*, [1. ed. (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1969)]; Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America: Historical Studies of Chile and Brazil* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967).

The idea of North American imperialism has been recently analyzed under new perspectives influenced by cultural history. Seeing the encounter between the United States and the world as more than the history of a relation between conquerors and subordinates or exploiters and victims, recent work has begun to look at the many levels that characterized these encounters and the active role that different sectors of society played in them. In the Latin American case, North America's imperialism could also be labeled as 'imperialism by invitation' because many Latin Americans welcomed the United States' growing presence in the region in the twentieth century. To be sure, the relations between North and Latin Americans were unbalanced and North Americans often obtained a better gain. However, Latin Americans also had their own agendas and used this relationship for their own benefit. Likewise, it is important to understand that North America's expansionist policy had a strong influence not only on the culture of those places with strong North American intervention, but also on the national culture of the United States, in which imperialism has gone unrecognized as a way of life. At the same time that the United States expanded its influence over the world, North American culture changed within its own political frontiers. In this way, North American imperialism has not been exclusively economic, but has influenced and has been influenced by other factors such as education, consumption culture and science.<sup>5</sup>

American imperialism differs from the more commonly studied forms of European imperialism in that it never attempted to establish formal colonies. While European empires were characterized by having formal administrators in their colonial possessions in Africa and Asia with the power to regulate internal affairs, the United States never desired a direct form of control over its Latin American neighbors. On the contrary, many North Americans in the twentieth century openly rejected any form of straight colonialism. However, a lack of colonial administrators or the desire to formally control the lives of

5. Gilbert Joseph, Catherine LeGrand, and Ricardo Donato Salvatore, eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Ricardo Donato Salvatore, ed., *Culturas imperiales: experiencia y representación en América, Asia y África* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). The idea that empires were not coherent units when they began their expansion policies and were in fact shaped in many ways by the imperial experience had its origins in scholarship on European imperialism, Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

populations overseas did not mean that the United States did not develop a wide expansionist project over Latin America in the twentieth century. Through military interventions, bank loans, presence of corporations, cultural exchange, multilateral cooperation, among many others, the United States developed the power to constantly influence the fate of Latin Americans. In this way, this work understands American imperialism as the many situations in which the United States used its growing economic, social, and cultural presence in Latin America to create power relations that leaned heavily on the American side in detriment of Latin American interests.

In the realm of science, the growing presence that the United States acquired during the twentieth century in Colombia was reflected in the relationships between North American and Colombian naturalists. Colombian scientists often turned their eyes towards the North to follow closely the scientific work carried out in the United States. Although Colombian science developed a dynamic of its own with specific interests at hand, naturalists constantly resorted to the work, libraries, universities, and museums in the United States to focus their studies. Colombian academics tried hard to gain recognition among their North American colleagues and not only welcomed them when they carried out expeditions on Colombian territory, but also gave them a privileged position in their careers. Colombians constantly invited North Americans into their everyday scientific practices, creating hierarchies that from the beginning gave North Americans a position of power. North American naturalists happily encouraged their relationship with Colombians. They saw in their colleagues a point of support to obtain scientific recognition. Colombia presented great potential in the study of natural history studies and only with the local knowledge that Colombians gave them, were they able to appropriate Colombian nature. Of course, even if the balance of power leaned to the North American side, Colombians gained much from this informal imperial relation, especially because they acquired privileged positions within Colombia's scientific community and society. In other words, North America's influence in Latin America should be studied taking into account the local contexts in which these relations were possible. Although Latin American history was influenced by North American presence, it was not determined by it.<sup>6</sup>

This book pays special attention to the role of nationalism and state formation to understand the perception of nature in Colombia. In the first decades of the twentieth century different efforts, both private and state-funded, emerged in this

6. Some well-researched books that include cultural perspectives in their approach to U.S.-Latin America relations include: Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940*; Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Louis A. Pérez, *The War of 1898: the United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

country to comprehend its natural world. These efforts materialized in a time of a strong national pride in Latin America in general. Rulers in countries like Brazil, Mexico and Colombia embraced nationalist policies seeking to strengthen their nations by creating a sense of common identity among its peoples. They put a lot of effort on defining their national identity based on the value of local folklore, arts, popular idiosyncrasies and native cultures. Historians have given important attention to the relation between nation formation and cultural politics in these countries,<sup>7</sup> and in recent years scholars have started to study the place of nature in Latin American nation-building processes.<sup>8</sup> This book is indebted in many ways to these literatures. I try to trace how during the first half of the twentieth century nature slowly became a national treasure in Colombia. Birds, as well as plants and animals in general, became as important as the indigenous past or popular folklore in defining what it meant to be Colombian.

However, the main argument I would like to convey to the reader is that historians of science and historians in general still need to understand the way in which nationalism and imperialism interact with each other. In my case in particular, I will study the ways in which the formation of the Colombian nation interacted with and was influenced by U.S. imperialism during the first decades of the twentieth century. After all, it was in part thanks to the vast studies that several ornithologists in the United States carried out in the first half of the twentieth century that many Colombians felt—and still feel—patriotic about the number of birds in their country. Likewise, it was partly thanks to the interventions of some bird conservationists in the United States, and their

7. See: Catalina Muñoz, “To Colombianize Colombia: Cultural Politics, Modernization and Nationalism in Colombia, 1930-1946” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009); Renán Silva, *República liberal, intelectuales y cultura popular* (Medellín: La Carreta Editores, 2005); Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis, eds., *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: the First Vargas Regime, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

8. One important example can be found in Stuart McCook who studied plants and the way in which scientists tried to include them as important actors in the consolidation of Latin American nations. McCook’s work was pioneer in our understanding of the way in which some Latin American countries gave plants a civil status in their societies. See: McCook, *States of Nature: Science, Agriculture, and Environment in the Spanish Caribbean, 1760-1940*. Other important examples include: Seth Garfield, “A Nationalist Environment: Indians, Nature, and the Construction of the Xingu National Park in Brazil,” *Luso-Brazilian Review* 41, no. 1 (2004); Regina Horta Duarte, “Pássaros e cientistas no Brasil: Em busca de proteção, 1894-1938,” *Latin American Research Review* 41, no. 1 (2006); Vanderlei Sebastião de Souza, “Arthur Neiva e a ‘questão nacional’ nos anos 1910 e 1920,” *Hist. cienc. saude-Manguinhos* 16 (2009); Matthew Vitz, “Revolutionary Environments: The Politics of Nature and Space in the Valley of Mexico, 1890-1940s” (Ph. D. diss., New York University, 2010).